

Resistance, Play and Esports Chants: A Super Smash Bros. Melee Case Study

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Keywords

Super Smash Bros. Melee, grassroots esports, fan culture, play, resistance, esports chants

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to critically explore a ‘resistant’ esports culture in the form of the Super Smash Bros. Melee (SSBM) scene in the United Kingdom (UK). In particular, the focus of this paper is to analyse the distinctive and at times provocative ‘esports chants’ (similar to football chants) that take place alongside competitive play at live tournaments. Our critical aim is to question how far grassroots organised esports could represent an alternative to more mainstream and commercialised esports formats that as Veli-Matti Karhulahti (2017: 46) has recently noted, is defined by their economic foundation. In the grassroots organisation, practices and play of SSBM, a critical alternative to more mainstream esports is described that is more community focused; as well as more commercially and culturally resistant.

The research methods of this paper consist of ethnographic research, using field notes and informal conversations with the players and organisers at UK SSBM tournaments, specifically Fête. Between 2nd-4th August 2019, both researchers attended Fête, hosted at Staffordshire University, in the role of event organisers (event manager and volunteer). Over 320 players gathered to compete at Fête, which was the ‘spiritual successor’ to a popular UK SSBM tournament that had ran for years prior named Heir to the Throne 5 (Law and Jarrett 2020). These tournaments are significant as examples of relatively large grassroots esports events planned entirely by the UK SSBM community, attracting players from around the world and doing so with next to no commercial support.

In relation to esports literature, there does not appear to be earlier empirical research focusing on live esports events from an event organisers perspective. Instead, there has been a rising interest towards online spectatorship (Taylor 2012; Taylor 2018), and even though esports spectatorship is commonly connected to twitch chats, where

Proceedings of DiGRA 2020

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comments on the event are also a way to cheer for favourite teams and players (Hamari and Sjöblom 2017); the findings of this research suggest a localised and commercially resistant practice amongst the live audience through esports chants. These chants contain a significant level of cultural and gaming capital that is known to the culture of UK SSBM, but they are also representative of a broader notion of play on the part of spectators (Newman, 2008). These live esports event chants are an understudied site of playful interaction on the part of audiences, but it is clear how they are influenced by similar sporting and traditionally masculine chants (for example, football chants). A sample of the chants at Fête include:

"He's big, he's red, his feet stick out the bed, Elliot, Elliot" (Based off the footballer Peter Crouch, Liverpool and England).

"Adam Farmer's having a party, bring your vodka and your Charlie" (Based off the footballer Jamie Vardy, Leicester)

"*@#? him up (X), *@#? him up clap clap" (X= two syllable player name)

"*@#? the Tories clap clap clap clap"

In Armstrong and Young's (2009) critical analysis of football chants, they describe the language of chants in poetic terms, as a way of 'moving [us] into the analysis of the social event of football support, for the world of chanting fans pitches us into a universe which is:

- filled with a passion and a love;
- with a parallel and coexisting set of hatreds;
- with the crucial aspects of a narrow and ferociously demonstrated cultural identity;
- with an emotional commitment to events that at other times and in other circumstances would be laughable or even ridiculous.

In the chants of SSBM players and spectators, a similarly unifying set of cultural capitals is on display that speaks to both players, the game and the locality that it is being played in. The lyrics of these esports chants do not appear to be documented on the Internet, but only in the minds of SSMB players, from live tournaments and previous tournament streams where you can hear the chants from the crowd. As is evidenced in the sample of chants above, references to players' names, game knowledge and shared political and cultural views are often displayed. Frans Mäyrä (2008) suggests that people often share the same language and also interest in artefacts (like original packaged games and gaming devices); where they play the same games and adapt terminologies that suit those purposes. The chants from the UK SSMB culture suggest that when players play together, they frequently occupy a shared space, where they engage in shared rituals of play (Mäyrä, 2008). As this paper has posited, it is these uniquely localised practices that are distinctive in grassroots esports such as SSBM and moreover, exemplify a resistant form of cultural identity that more mainstream and brand friendly commercial esports events would find difficult to replicate.

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